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XXVIII.—*On the Khasia Tribe.* By Lieut. E. H. STEEL, R.A.

[Read November 10th, 1868.]

SEPARATING the plains of Eastern Bengal from the valley of Assam, lies the hill-range commonly called the Khasia Hills, but, in reality, peopled by *several* tribes. The Khasias are the best known from our having two hill-stations among them, and, though not the largest tribe by any means, are, from their contact with us, the most civilised; they number about 70,000. Their neighbours are the Garrows to the west, and the Jyn-teahs and various Naga tribes to the east. The Khasia Hills are exceedingly remarkable from many causes, and their inhabitants are no less so.

The mountain-range at Cherrapoongie (which is a British cantonment and a large native village) attains an elevation of some 4,000 feet, and as the rise is exceedingly abrupt, the hillside consequently forms a gigantic natural wall, against which the vapour-laden south-west monsoon strikes during the monsoon months, from May to October. This produces an immense rainfall, amounting in some years to as much as six hundred inches: in July 1865, two hundred and eighteen inches of rain fell. This immense amount of water falls only over a very small tract, some twelve miles broad; for at Silhet, twenty-nine miles from the foot of the hill southward, the rainfall is one hundred and fifty inches: and at Shillong, twenty miles in the interior of the hills, and 5,300 feet above the level of the sea, the fall is only eighty inches. This enormous deluge of water rushes down into the southern plains over the side of the hill, forming many magnificent waterfalls, those of Mausmai being 1,800 feet high, about 1,100 a series of falls from ledge to ledge, and 670 feet at the bottom, one single leap. In the cold season, these are nearly dry, but during the rains they are an immense sheet of water, though only the drainage of the Cherra plateau, some eight square miles, goes to form them; but where the rainfall is 1·5 inch in thirty-five minutes, the volume of water can hardly be imagined, much less measured. The action of water is here seen exceedingly clearly: immense valleys, as the Temshung, 3,000 feet deep, have been formed by its agency alone. The hills are all rounded by its action, and the bare rock crops up everywhere, the soil having been

washed away. The rock is principally sandstone, and in many places above it lies mountain-limestone, with coal. The limestone is fissured, and worn into caves in many places by the action of water; some of the caves are of great length,—to these I hope to advert hereafter. The rainy season sets in at the latter end of May, and lasts till the end of September; the climate during October and November, at Cherrapoongie, will stand comparison with that of any other part of the world. The usual rain falls about Christmas for a few days, when the sky becomes very cloudy; but on this clearing off, the fine weather, with a strong north-westerly wind, continues during February and March. The weather begins to be showery in April; but it is not, as I said before, until May that the deluge begins. The temperature during the rains never rises above 73° or 74°, unless during a break in the rain, when it goes up to 86° Fahr. During the cold weather, in the interior of the hills, water often freezes: I have several times found ice in my basin, which had been left out all night, half-an-inch in thickness, but this is only in the interior, and above the 5,000 feet line. To the northward lies the valley of Assam, through which the Bramahputra flows. A glance at the map will show more clearly, than I can describe it, the peninsular form of the whole range, how it juts out from China into the plains.

With regard to the inhabitants (the Khasias, of whom I am now speaking), they differ in race, language, religion, and everything else, from the Bengalis of Silhet, on the one hand; and the tribes of the valley of Assam, on the other side. They are of a Mongol cast of countenance, fair skinned, with straight black hair, scant moustache, and with no beard or whisker, and about 5 feet 4 ins. in average height. Their language, of which I have a small vocabulary, is only spoken; it differs radically, I believe, from Sanskrit. The utterance of the people is clear and distinct, even though they are great pân-eaters; and they call to one another, long distances, from hill-top to hill-top, the cry they use to call attention being, I am told, somewhat similar to that used by the aborigines in Australia. All the foreign articles which are brought into the hills are called by their Hindustani names, it is almost needless to mention; for many articles which are common as the ordinary necessities of life among us, were unknown in the hills before our occupancy. The language is poor in expression, and, I should think, incapable of being used for philosophic discussion, or any of the higher uses of language. Of their religion I can say but little, for there is but little to speak of. I think that they, as a rule, have a greater fear of evil spirits than love or reverence for good ones; but from all I could see, they did not care much for

either. Nevertheless, with all their want of religion, they have an innate regard for the truth, and can appreciate honest and upright dealing in others; in this, as in many other things, they are in advance of the far more civilised Hindoo. Khasias are superstitious and believe in omens; and they have a curious custom of breaking eggs on a board, and in the disposition of the various pieces of shell and of the yolk of the egg, they pretend to find indications for future guidance.

The dress of the men is very simple, consisting of a small waist-cloth, and a garment over it, similar to the smock frock worn by the English peasantry, only it has no sleeves, or very short ones; it comes half down to the knee, where it is fringed, and is made of cotton; the legs and arms are bare. On the head is worn a high skull-cap of black cloth, in the form of a truncated cone; but the more civilised of the tribe, are fast adopting Bengali dhoties and chupkuns, with the turban. They are, as well as the women, extremely fond of ornaments; earrings and necklaces of gold being worn by all who can afford them. The women are fond of dress. They are generally smaller than the men, also fairer. Their dress is of native silk, consisting of one long piece, red, yellow, or black (of which I have two specimens); this is knotted at the shoulder in a peculiar manner, and goes over a jacket made either of velvet or cloth; over all is a striped cloak, made of a mixture of silk and cotton, of which I have a specimen, though now much worn. They wear no head-dress, the hair being tied in knot at the back; the legs and feet are bare from the knee, the dress descending so far. They wear earrings and necklaces of gold, the latter mixed with coral, which they prize very highly; they also wear bracelets of silver, weighing five or six ounces each, but never anklets, like the Hindoos. They carry loads, and assist in tilling the rice-fields, fetch wood, carry water, and look after the house generally.

Their houses, in places where wood is abundant, are made entirely of wood, and most substantially built, and thatched either with grass or with the leaves of the cane, which grows in plenty in the lower hills. A Khasia house is made as follows:—large solid trees are cut for posts, for the corners and doorways, and for the support of the roof when required; the spaces between the posts are filled in with boards, placed horizontally. The houses in many cases are divided into three or four rooms,—an outer room for general purposes, and the others as sleeping or store apartments; some, however, are made into one large room only, with a slight partition for the sleeping places. The hearth is built on the ground; three little pillars of mud, a foot high, support the cooking-pot, and wood

is put as firing beneath. In houses floored with wood, a regular square hearth is made, three feet, or so, square; over the hearth is a frame, some five feet above the fire, suspended from the roof, and in this the coverings used as umbrellas are placed; they intercept the sparks, which would otherwise set fire to the roof. In other places, where stone is near at hand, the houses are built of it, and to each house there is generally a little courtyard; in no case are two houses built together, each one generally standing in a little piece of ground by itself. I have never seen any cave-dwellings, nor have I heard of any. The caves are supposed generally to be inhabited by evil spirits. We visited, whilst I was at Cherra, two caves; they were formed by the action of water (this was the opinion of Capt. Godwin Austen); one of them was of great length, and we took two hours reaching the end; a stream of water flowed through it, and in one place there was a pool, but in it no fish of any sort. I found no traces of man or of animals,—but mine was only a cursory examination. The floor seemed to be solid limestone, but it might have been merely an accumulation of stalagmites. As with all savage people I have ever seen, the doorways to their houses are generally of less height than an average man's stature.

With regard to their customs, some are very peculiar; the whole village, for instance, congregate and assist at a birth. The marriage ceremony is very simple. The couple about to be married merely sit together in one seat, and receive their friends, to whom they give a dinner or feast. The marriage tie is easily dissolved. The husband gives the woman five cowries (the small shells in use as currency in India), and the woman throws them away; they are then free to be married again, the children remaining with the mother. This dissolution of the marriage tie is, however, rare, and, unless for some grave fault on the one side or the other, is rarely resorted to. It is needless to say that wife-beating is unknown, and seems to me to be more a token of civilised than of savage life. In the case of twins being born, one used frequently to be killed: it is considered unlucky, and also degrading, to have twins, as they consider that it assimilates them with the lower animals. The house belongs to the woman; and in case of the husband dying or being separated from her, it remains her property. The word in Khasia for a tree and a house are almost the same, the one being "iing" and the other "ing"; also fire and wood are almost the same, one being "ding", the other "diing". This is very remarkable, I believe, and of great interest, I should think, to philologists. The dead are burned, not buried. The body, with a quantity of wood, is placed in a square box, built upon the ground with boarding, some seven feet high; any spot

seems to be selected. The funeral pyre, thus composed, is set fire to, and the body consumed to ashes: the relations howl, and show other savage signs of grief. In no case is a body buried.

In the month of March, at the new moon, they have grand dances, and at these dances many matches are made. It is customary for unmarried girls only to dance. They assemble in certain places, where a ring is formed, the girls standing two and two in the centre, facing outwards, in no particular order; they then move slowly round from left to right, the whole mass of them in twos, with a sidling step, such as soldiers make in "closing" right or left, with eyes fixed on the ground. The young bachelors run round the outside of the ring, waving fans made of feathers; outside them again comes the ring of spectators, old married men and women, with children too young to be married. Rude music is played the whole time, and the spirit of the proceedings is kept up by frequent and deep potations on the part of the male dancers and musicians. The whole is of an orderly character, and never degenerates into an orgie. The demure looks of the girls, some pretty enough, and the ardent glances of the youths as they pass round and peep slyly at their lovers, is amusing enough, and makes a pretty picture. The dress of the girl is of silk throughout, and the ornaments of gold and coral, all but the crown, feather, and bracelets, which are of silver.

Some of the men, and also women, are possessed of great strength, being perfect marvels of muscular development, the feet and legs being exceedingly well formed. They carry their loads on their backs, a strap passing round the load and over their forehead. They carry grain in baskets of split cane, very neatly worked, of a conical form, the apex of the cone, as the basket is carried, pointing downwards. In the eastern hills, among the Jynteahs, who are closely allied to the Khasias, the baskets are made of all shapes, and lined exceedingly neatly with india-rubber, for the purpose of holding water. Some tribes make their baskets square at the foot, so that they stand upright; but the Khasias, I know not why, never do so. The Jynteah water-baskets are all square at the bottom. The cacanoop, which is used as an umbrella, is made of bamboo-leaves, and covered with a very fine network of bamboo, and bound round the edges. A flat cover is also used, of the same description, to protect the basket from rain, another being carried in between the back and the point of the basket. When carrying a basket, they do not use the shell-like cacanoop, but merely these shield-like pieces.

Khasias are great pân-eaters ; the ingredients—in a killie or chew of pân—being the pân-leaf, betel-nut, and lime ; the natives carry it in a bag made of rhea-grass, the lime in a metal, and the leaf in a bamboo-box. They chew this mixture to excess ; it is a great stimulant, and enlarges the lips, and altogether deforms the mouth.

The Khasias raise monuments to their dead ; these are generally put up in conspicuous places, the top of a hill, or near to some village or wood. They are of a singular form and appearance, being composed of large upright stones, set close together. Their number varies, but it is generally uneven ; the centre stone is the tallest, and the size of the stones decreases on each side of it, the outside ones being the smallest. In front of most of these monuments are placed smaller flat stones, supported on small uprights, some two feet and a-half or three feet above the ground : these look like seats, and are in fact used as such by wayfarers, when the monuments are at the side of the road. I believe they contain, when first raised, the ashes of the dead ; but this I cannot be sure of, as I never found any,—this may be owing to the rain washing them away. In some places, square tombs are made of stone, without any upright stones at all near them ; some of them are of immense size, others small,—in all cases the sides and roof are of single stones ; these have undoubtedly contained ashes. In all cases the stones are set up in a straight line, and are never placed in a circle, that I have seen anywhere in the hills. The uprights are carefully cut in the later monuments, but in the older ones the stones seem very roughly hewn. They are made of the prevailing stones of the country, sandstone in the southern and granite in the northern hills. The granite stones are very rough, and entirely unmarked with chisel. In some of the monuments, the central stone is surmounted by a corona,—but this construction is rare. When marching in the hills once, I saw a stone bridge made over a stream, near the village of Umwai ; it was very remarkable for the immense size of the central stone, which was 26 feet long by 4 feet wide and $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick. It was placed on two uprights some eight feet high, in the bed of the stream, and the roadway was continued to the bank on either side by two smaller blocks, each some ten or twelve feet long : how it got there I know not. We imagined it had been carried there, and rolled up an inclined plane in the dry season. I saw many smaller bridges made there, but none nearly as large as this. My servant, a most intelligent Khasia, once asked my leave to go and help erect a stone as a monument to one of his relatives.

He told me the stone was carried to the place, and then hauled into an upright position by ropes. They only placed one stone, and no more. This makes me think that the monument, when finished, is to more than one of the members of a family; and this accounts for the different number of stones in different monuments. In some places a hillside is literally covered with them. The largest I have seen are at the village of Morphlong; they are about 18 feet high and 4 feet broad at base, and 18 inches thick. They are of old date, as they show no marks like the more modern ones, of chisel and hammer.

The Khasias grow, in their villages, considerable crops of rice, and show some skill in irrigating them. The embankments at Mokesa, in the western hills, are of considerable size, and the water is conducted from field to field in a most skilful manner, and the levels are very true. They grow several other grain crops,—murrowa, from which a spirit is made, and others, of which I do not know the names. They do not plough the fields, but hoe them. The hoes are made in the hills, and are sold to the people of the plains on the northern side, being often used in place of money. In these hills are found coal, iron, and limestone, all of superior quality; but the inhabitants do not use the first, always burning wood. They only burn the limestone at Cherra in small quantities, and the iron is very rudely worked indeed. When travelling in the hills, some two years ago, I came across, at a place called Nongspon, some Khasia iron-works, which I carefully examined. The ore used was a magnetic iron-sand, which was dug out of the hillside, and washed by women in a trough, through which a stream of water flowed. The sand was then taken, and a certain quantity of it put into a receptacle formed in the floor of a hut; over this was heaped charcoal, and the “charge” worked by bellows of a most peculiar construction, worked by men and women, two at a time. No flux is used; the iron is simply fused into a mass, and stirred constantly with a bar of iron: the manufacture is of the coarsest, and the iron thus made exceedingly impure. We made out that, at this work, the smelters earned two shillings a day. The pig of iron is not worked up in the place it is manufactured in, but taken to other villages for that purpose. The hammer and anvil are very peculiar, and of small size; the bellows are of the same description as those used for smelting, but placed horizontally, and, being smaller, are worked by hand; their anvils are of stone,—those I saw were of greenstone. From this iron they make their hoes, and swords, and arrow-points; they are all

exceedingly soft and bend easily, though they are, of course, easily ground to an edge or point.

Khasias are, as a rule, courageous, and fight well behind stockades, when their wretched weapons are taken into account. Their stockades are beautifully made, and of great strength,—made of tree-trunks, upright, and tied together with cane; they plant the ground in front with spokes of bamboo, six inches long, hardened in the fire, and also strengthen their position by digging deep pitfalls, which they fill with spikes.

They are great eaters of dried fish; and I was once invited to a grand Khasia fishing in one of the streams at the foot of the hills: their method was as follows. At one of the rapids above, an immensely deep pool, full of large fish, they built a dam of stones, and at intervals, on this, placed baskets of cane filled with *cocculus indicus*,—the fruit is about the size of a walnut: of this they pounded an immense quantity, and let the water carry the juice into the pool. The fish became stupefied in about five hours, and, rising to the surface, were swept down the stream into large receptacles formed of stones; next morning they were taken away up the hill to be dried, to the amount of 600 maunds, or more than twenty tons. About two hundred men were engaged in this work.

In this account of the Khasias, I have not spoken of the trade in lime and oranges that is carried on, for this is not a native industry; the trade in them was begun by Europeans, and is now carried on, by European agents, with native workmen and coolies.
